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ABSTRACT

This status report discusses the issues and concerns of assessing, at a national level, the ability of college graduates to think critically, solve problems, and communicate effectively (National Education Goal 5). Two workshops have been held on the issue and participants indicated that assessment requires a working consensus on the specific skills to be measured and must be considered from the perspective of the teaching/learning experience as a whole. The report notes that a delphi study is planned involving faculty, employers, policymakers, and others which will attempt to develop a working consensus concerning workplace and citizenship skill needs of the larger community. This study will be followed by a more formal process to design a process to assess the teaching and learning of these skills. Activities to date have found that the greatest concern is not whether skills and abilities are identified and validated, but how they should be assessed. From the institutional perspective the concern is that assessments focusing on workplace and citizenship skills may cause a reshaping of the role of many colleges, and that development of workplace/citizenship skills may sometimes be inconsistent with the individual freedoms of students and faculty. Concluding comments argue that, based on the reasons given by students for attending college, the identification and assessment of workplace/citizenship skills is relevant in today's world. (Contains four references.) (GLR)

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National Assessment of College Student Learning: A Status Report
Sal Corrallo
February 1, 1993

The November-December 1991 issue of Assessment Update reported that the National Center for Education Statistics was about to undertake an effort to identify ways of measuring the ability of college graduates to think critically, solve problems, and communicate effectively. The project was undertaken in direct support of National Education Goal 5. Goal 5, was conceived in response to a concern that the nation's ability to compete in a global economy was hampered by a lack of education and training by, among others, large numbers of postsecondary graduates. After considering the barriers or problems standing in the way of achieving the goal, five objectives were identified for attention and as necessary first steps. The fifth objective focused on the higher order thinking and communication skills of college graduates. These skills were to be thought of in terms of their utility in the workplace and for the practice of citizenship. Since that time NCES has conducted two planning workshops, the first in November 1991. Participants were asked to consider the issues and concerns for each stage of the project. i.e., what should be assessed, at what level(s) of achievement, when and how? The commissioned background papers, reviews and workshop discussions, covered all four issues, in varying degrees. Most of the discussion focused on the application of assessment process.

HE026 785

Notwithstanding, it was clear from the papers and the proceedings that until a working consensus of the higher order thinking and communication skills and related levels of assessment is compiled and consideration given as to how these skills may be measured, it is futile to discuss the time and means of assessment. The 1992 National Education Goals Panel Report indicates that "We need a clearer understanding of the knowledge and skills...graduates attain and how they relate to the demands of the world marketplace and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship." [1] Workshop participants were in general agreement that assessment for accountability, alone, would not serve the purposes of the National Goal. Assessment must be considered from the perspective of the teaching/learning experience as a whole.

Skills identification was the primary theme of the second workshop, conducted in November 1992. Four papers were commissioned to identify skills, levels of achievement and examples of how these skills might be assessed. These included single papers on Speaking and Listening and Reading and Writing along with two papers on Critical Thinking and Problem Solving. Each paper was used as the basis of one of four workshops. Representatives, primarily from the business community and college faculty, attempted to reach some level of closure on the specific sets of speaking and listening, reading and writing, and problem solving and critical thinking skills a college graduate should master prior to graduation. The results were mixed. Some work group participants, primarily faculty members, were still coming to grips with the notion of

national assessment of college student learning. In essence they, like many in the first workshop, argued that the learning experience is so personal that the only effective way to assess is to observe individual student learning over an extended period of time. As might be expected workshop participants provided a mixed set of suggestions. These included listings of problem solving and critical thinking skills, a listing of speaking and listening skills, and a rationale for the assessment of reading and writing skills. The papers, reviews and proceedings will be published during the summer of 1993.

In 1993, in a continuing effort to identify, and then develop a working consensus of the workplace and citizenship skill needs of the larger community, NCES contracted with the Center for the Study of Higher Education at Penn State University. They have been asked to conduct a two step delphi survey, using the materials developed for the second workshop but supplemented by information from other sources. They will also use an extensive group of advisors to develop the initial listing of skills. The delphi survey group will include 270 faculty, 140 employers, 100 policymakers, and 80 persons who participated in the earlier workshops. Of critical importance are the opinions of faculty and members of the workplace community. The final report, which will published, will summarize the results of the survey for each of the skill areas. In addition the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems has been given a task order to inventory and evaluate current indirect approaches to assessment at the postsecondary level. The findings

from each of these efforts have or will be published to assure that the larger community is kept informed.

All of these efforts are considered preliminary to a more formal process to identify and design a process to assess the teaching learning of these skills. To this end a study design contractor (Phase I) will be selected by the end of the September 1993. The study design contractor will, drawing upon all previous NCES work and other sources, be responsible for the development of a set of analytical frameworks for each of the skill areas. Each framework will include the set of skills to be assessed, scales for assessing levels of achievement, and examples of alternative approaches for assessment. The frameworks will be used as the basis for the design and implementation of the formal assessment process (Phase II). This contract will begin in 1996 and extend for 4 years.

So much for the mechanics of the process. What has been learned to date, regarding the feasibility and desirability of the project? The greatest concern in both workshops, and in much of the literature, is not whether there are sets of work and citizenship skills and abilities that may be identified and validated, but rather how these should be assessed? First it is feared that a set of higher order thinking and communication skills will be identified and the scales used to measure competency will become the basis for the development of standards of college student learning. Second most of the assessment instrumentation used has been developed not by the academic or business community, but by

the commercial testing industry with standards or norms developed outside the academic or workplace community. Third, there is concern that the focus upon general intellectual skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and communication skills is too narrow and that content will be lost. Fourth teaching to the test, both in terms of form and content, can narrow rather than broaden the college learning experience. Fifth attention will not be given to identifying skills that the college graduate should master before they leave college, other than those needed for the workplace and citizenship.

From an institutional perspective, were the assessment to focus only on the set of workplace and citizenship skills, there is concern this would reshape or refocus the role of many colleges. Further in higher education, certainly at the four year liberal arts colleges and in the universities, there is more implied emphasis on individual freedoms for faculty and students at academic, political, and social levels. Some feel the teaching/learning of the skills requirements of the workplace and for citizenship may sometimes be inconsistent with the individual freedoms of students and faculty and the attributes of the well rounded college graduate. Also some are concerned that course/program assessment could result in national standards. They point to programs such as accounting, nursing, and pharmacy among others, which require graduates to take certification examinations upon leaving school.

At the end of the second workshop participants were asked to identify next steps, potential problems, additional research and individuals or groups that needed to be involved. The responses were not unexpected. They included: further refinement of the skills and competencies to be assessed; the need to link skills across disciplines and competencies; validation of the skills both from the perspective of work and citizenship; the need to keep the project open to all affected publics; and a concern that the "national" versus "individualized" nature of assessment be recognized and accounted for in developing an assessment approach.

A closing thought with regard to the means of assessment. As suggested earlier, identification of the most popular reason freshman give for attending college is to get a better job.[2] Further, roughly two-thirds of recent college graduates completed a professional/occupational related program.[3] Given the enrollment in career related programs and the student's stated reason for attending college, doesn't it seem reasonable for colleges in general and faculty in particular, to do all they can to help the students obtain the knowledge and skills they need to cope? Past studies attempting to link grade point averages with job performance found little relationship with the skills and competencies individual students need for most jobs. However when grades in job related courses are considered, a positive relationship with job performance was identified.[4] Thus it appears the college graduate is better judged, not by the grades, but rather by the skills they bring with them to the job. Relating

job performance to skills has implication for those concerned with the means. For example if it can be established that mastery of specific course content, given that it reflects what students need to know for work or citizenship, then classroom grades might be an appropriate assessment of the knowledge and skills of all or selected groups of college graduates. The issue then would be one of certification; are colleges teaching and then assessing attainment of the necessary knowledge and skills?

These concerns will be the primary focus of the major expenditure of time, effort and resources over the next thirty months. It is an effort that is of vital importance to all who are participants. practitioners, or users of postsecondary education.

1. National Education Goals Panel, The National Education Goals Report: Building a Nation of Learners, Government Printing Office, Washington D.C. 20402, 1992.

2. See "The American College Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1992," Published by the American Council on Education and the University of California at Los Angeles higher Education Research Institute.

3. U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Educational Statistics, Table 235, U.S. Government Printing Office, (ISBN 0-16-0359966-1) Washington, D.C. 20402-9328.

4. Peter Cappelli, "College Students and the Workplace: Assessing Performance to Improve the Fit", Change, November /December 1992, Washington, D.C.